**Nicholas Ashton Piano Recital Rannoch Old Kirk Sunday 17 July, 2022 at 3pm**

Haydn Variations H.VII /6 F minor 15’

Beethoven Sonata op 26 Ab major 20’

1. Andante con variazione
2. Scherzo con trio
3. Marche Funebre (sulla morte d’un Eroe**)**
4. Finale: Rondo

Liszt Etude “La Chasse” E major 3’

Chopin Etude op 25 No 7 C sharp minor 5’

Mendelssohn Gondellied op 19/6 G minor 3’

Schumann Vogel als Prophet op 82/7 4’

Schumann Papillons op 2 14’

**Programme Notes**

**Joseph Haydn**

**Variations, F minor, Hob.XVII: 6**

This work, composed in 1793 is possibly Haydn’s most celebrated work for solo keyboard not a sonata, or using sonata form in the specific sense. The structure of the work is almost unique, in that it consists of two contrasting themes; the first a melancholy and rhythmically irregular figure in F minor and contrasted with a smoother and more lyrical second melodic theme in F major. Both themes are in two parts, ie. each a short binary form.
These are each varied three times in the same order, before returning to the opening first theme, which disappears into a dramatic coda. The relationship between the gently lilting accompaniment of the opening theme and the terse dotted rhythm of the melody – insistently present throughout the work – is one of its most fascinating elements. There is a balance, amongst the most perfectly realized in all Haydn’s mature works, between a repetitive Classical symmetry and the positioning of silence as an importance constituent; this is most striking in the final return of the first theme and the coda, when the rhythm motif of the theme, modulating with increasing distance away from F minor, is dovetailed carefully with two controlled pauses. The effect is unsettling – it turns on its head the listener’s expectations of what is to follow, rather in the manner of the sudden evaporation of the regular rhythm – famously the feature of the second movement of the Symphony No 101 (“the Clock”).

**Ludwig van Beethoven**

**Sonata op 26 Ab major**

This work was composed in 1802 in Vienna and is a fine example of Beethoven’s gradual assimilation of sonata style into a more individual structure, which was to become an increasing feature of his writing, particularly in the so-called middle and especially late period sonatas. None of the movements is actually in sonata form: the first is a Theme and Variations, the second a quick Scherzo and Trio, the third a ternary form March and the Finale a Rondo.

The result is a reciprocal arrangement between structural form and expressive content at the same time less formal and more fluid than earlier works. The next sonatas, op 27, are both entitled quasi una fantasia and this subtitle may refer directly to the experimentation which is begun in op. 26.

The key of Ab major generally drew an expressive and lyrical approach from the composer; the slow movement of his (perhaps most famous) sonata, the op. 13 Pathètique, is set in the key, as is the extraordinary slow movement of his lesser known sonata op. 10 no. 1 and the slow movement of his first piano concerto. In these cases, Beethoven uses the key as a kind of relief from the drama and tension which is generated by the home key of C minor, and this sub-mediant relationship (between C minor and Ab major) is an increasing hallmark of his approach to harmonic structural relationships; it influenced Schubert to a remarkable degree. The other sonata set in Ab major appears at almost the very end of Beethoven’s output, that of the masterpiece op 110, which matches and expands upon the lyricism found in this work.

Both factors (formal structure and key/harmonic relationships) must have appealed to Frederic Chopin – he particularly admired this work and used it in his teaching, and it is also possible that he took the third movement funeral march as the starting point for his own in his second sonata op 35, although in Beethoven’s case, the approach to music for a funeral is that of grandeur, pomp and ceremony; in Chopin’s, the reference is to the abyss of grief, loneliness and loss. Beethoven actually entitles it as Marcia funebre sulla morte d’un Eroe (A Funeral March for the Death of a Hero). The great Swiss pianist Edwin Fischer remarked about the Rondo Finale that the texture should be evocative of a gentle rainfall, dropping picturesquely upon the gravestone of the fallen Hero.

**Franz Liszt Etude d’apres Paganini “La Chasse” E major**

This etude is the fifth of a collection of six etudes/studies for piano composed by Liszt in 1838 and subsequently revised in 1853, employing material from selected Caprices for solo violin by Nicolo Paganini. Other composers, including Schumann (and later Rachmaninov and Lutoslawski) were also sufficiently impressed by these virtuoso showpieces to use them. This etude has been nicknamed “La Chasse” (The Hunt), as its opening theme - harmonised in 6ths and 3rds -is strongly reminiscent of the horn/bugle calls featured in hunt-sports; Liszt embellishes this theme with gently lilting accompaniment recalling the rhythm of horse riders, and the scintillating middle section features glissandi and some very brilliant cross-hand figurations. If the title does indeed suggest a hunt, I have a strong feeling that the fox gets away at the end!

**Frederic Francois Chopin Etude op 25 no 7, C sharp minor**

This beautiful work is the seventh in the composer’s second book of Twelve Etudes, op 25, published in 1837, two years after the first book, also comprising twelve studies, op 10. These two collections have become the most widely admired and often-played works in the medium, as they represent an astonishing progression in the development of piano technique. Unlike all of the other studies, this example is in a slow tempo, and the technical approach differs, in that Chopin sets out to explore the possibilities of sustaining a prominent left-hand cantabile melody, with the right hand acting as an accompanist or duet partner. Sonority, voicing and expressive rubato, together with a richly chromatic harmonic framework and a wide dynamic palette of colour, are also exploited.

**Felix Mendelssohn: Gondolierlied, op 19b No 6 (1830), G minor**

This is the first in a series of three Venetian Gondolier Songs, or barcarolles, which Mendelssohn composed after visits to the lagoon city in the early 1830s. He included them in the collections of short piano works he entitled “Songs without Words”, which form a kind of personal musical diary kept throughout his life. Although they are basically intended as salon music (designed to appeal to the many accomplished amateur pianists of the time), the best of them transcend the medium and attain a lyrical intensity on a par with Chopin, Schumann and Liszt.

Here, Mendelssohn evokes the gently repetitive sound of oar strokes on water and the sway of a gondola, over which the gondolier croons a melancholy melody. Beneath that, however, there is an undercurrent of sadness, of loss and of longing – and perhaps even an unsettling suggestion of ghosts and death, as anyone who visited Venice will have experienced.

**Robert Schumann Vogel als Prophet op 82/7 4’**

Although Schumann, like Chopin, was critical of audiences who expected to find concrete, programmatic depictions in his music, he was not averse to supplying specific titles, particularly in sets of later works, such as the Album für die Jugend op 68, Bilder aus Ostern op 56 and Waldszenen, op 82 (1849). Concerning this latter set, Schumann wrote:

“The titles for pieces of music, since they again have come into favour in our day, have been censured here and there, and it has been said that ‘good music needs no sign-post.’”

This beautiful - and very strange - piece is taken from this set. The title itself, Vogel als Prophet (The Prophet Bird) is mysterious, and Schumann does not attempt to explain it, although the opening and closing sections, based on a hypnotically insistent rhythm, drawing an arpeggio from a dissonant starting note, are reminiscent of the calls of some exotic, lonely bird calling in the depths of the night. (Ravel may have had this motif in mind when composing his Oiseaux Tristes in 1905.) A brief middle section, like a chorale in its extremely regular rhythm and vertical block four-part harmonies, attempts to dissipate the melancholy stillness.

**Robert Schumann Papillons, op 2**

This was the second work of Schumann to appear in print in 1832 after his op 1 debut, the Abegg Variations. The title *Papillons* (Butterflies) may have originated at the time of some poems entitled *Schmetterlinge,* which Schumann wrote two years previously while he was living at the home of Friedrich Wieck, his teacher and future (extremely reluctant) father-in-law. The poems were all based light-heartedly upon the characters of his teacher and various friends; this fantastical element is central to the ephemeral quality of the subsequent piano composition.

In addition, the evocation of a masked ball in the Finale, which quotes the theme of a popular waltz, the *Grossvatertanz* (Grandfather Waltz) is derived from a scene in a contemporary novel by Jean Paul, *Die Flegeljahre* (The Awkward Age). This almost programmatic concept is adopted in other, more ambitious works, particularly “Carnival” op 9, which features descriptive titles for each number.

The work begins with an arpeggiated figure, rather in the manner of a curtain-raiser, revealing a tiny waltz theme of gentle, delicate melancholy. An abrupt modulation, from D major to Eb major, catapults the ebullient *commedia del’arte* character, Florestan, on-stage, and his presence thereafter (in numbers 3,4,6,8 and 9) is alternated by the delicate introversion of his partner character, Eusebius (numbers 1, 5 and 7). The two characters share the other numbers 10, 11 and particularly and most ingeniously in the Finale, which simultaneously superimposes the opening waltz theme over the *Grossvatertanz* theme and then proceeds to dissolve both, but at different speeds, while gradually introducing six delicate chimes on A, signalling 6 o’clock (presumably ante meridian!). A remarkable feature of the work is the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated keys in which the numbers are set. The strange, trance-like disappearance of the opening and finale themes at the end of the work and the dissolving of a dominant 7th harmony using harmonics lend the work an almost hallucinatory quality.

**Biography**

Nicholas Ashton was educated at Chetham’s School, Manchester, RNCM, and in Geneva and Frankfurt-am-Main.

Following a formal debut at the 1980 Manchester International Festival, Nicholas performed widely throughout Europe for ten years as a concerto soloist and recitalist. He subsequently worked for three years as a teacher and translator in Frankfurt and for one year in London as an assistant opera agent at Anglo-Swiss Artists’ Management.

Nicholas resumed performing as a result of encouragement from Murray Perahia and Menahem Pressler. His first public recital in Scotland in 1995 was highly praised and resulted in regular offers to play. A live recording of a subsequent recital at the Queen’s Hall in Edinburgh was brought out on CD in 1996. Since then, he has given seven solo recitals at the venue and has performed to critical acclaim in over 400 concerts throughout the UK, in Germany, Finland, Italy, Canada and the USA. He has also contributed regularly as a performer and in interview for the BBC, NDR 2 and 4, Bayern 4, Radio *Suisse Romande*, Radio New Zealand and in the USA. Nicholas has performed over eighty separate solo and chamber programmes for the Hamburg for the Hamburg Chamber Arts Association and has appeared regularly in the Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee Universities’ Recital series.

In 2008, a CD recording of the complete works for piano and the piano quintet by the distinguished Scottish composer Robert Crawford, released on the widely respected Delphian Records label, attracted very high praise in the media, including *International Record Review, The Scotsman, The Herald, Musical Opinion* and *The Gramophone.*

Recordings of contemporary two piano repertoire with the Lithuanian pianist Lauryna Sableviciute, and of the complete works for duet and two pianos by Mozart with the British pianist Andrew Wilde, are in preparation. Nicholas has a strong interest in new music and has performed and premiered works by many contemporary composers.

In chamber music, Nicholas has been a regular partner with the Edinburgh Quartet, performing with them a substantial part of the core piano quintet and quartet repertoire, and he is currently a member of the Cantilena Festival Players, recording an online video presentation in 2021 and returning to the live festival on the beautiful island of Islay in July, 2022.

For nearly 30 years, Nicholas fulfilled a full-time academic career. He was a Senior Lecturer and Director of Quality Assurance for the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University and Programme Leader for the Classical B.Mus degree. Since 2020, he has been a Principal Tutor at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and at the University of Edinburgh. He is also much demand as an examiner and adjudicator.